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ABSTRACT

Responses to the 1990 United States census question concerning languages other than English that are spoken at home are summarized. It was found that in 1990, 14 percent of the population 5 years and older spoke a language other than English at home, as contrasted with 11 percent in 1980. Languages spoken most commonly at home in descending order of percentage, were: Spanish; French; German; Chinese; Italian; Tagalog (Pilipino); Polish; Korean; Vietnamese; Portuguese; Japanese; Greek; Arabic; Hindi (Urdu); and Russian. For these languages, total numbers spoken in 1980 and 1990, and percentage changes, are charted. A map of the United States indicates percentages of the population in each state that speak a language other than English at home. It was found that slightly more than half of all non-English-speakers in the United States reside in three states: California; Texas; and New York. Data are also provided on the distribution of English language skills (speaks English not at all, not well, well, or very well) within the population that speaks a language other than English at home. (MSE)

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Census Questionnaire Content, 1990 CQC-16.
We Asked... You Told Us

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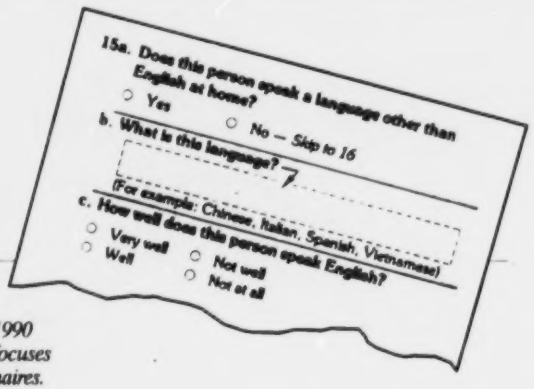
We asked... You told us

Language Spoken at Home


15a. Does this person speak a language other than English at home?
Yes
No — Skip to 16
b. What is this language?
(For example: Chinese, Italian, Spanish, Vietnamese)
c. How well does this person speak English?
Very well
Well
Not well
Not at all

The Census Bureau conducts a census of population and housing every 10 years. This bulletin is one of a series that shows the questions asked in the 1990 census and the answers that you, the American people, gave. Each bulletin focuses on a question or group of questions appearing on the 1990 census questionnaires.

In question **15a** on the 1990 census forms, **we asked** people if they spoke a language other than English at home. For those who answered yes, we asked which language they spoke (part **b**) and how well they spoke English (part **c**). From what **you told us,** we learned that:

- In 1990, 31.8 million U.S. residents, or 14 percent of the population 5 years old and over, reported they spoke a language other than English at home. These figures compare with 23.1 million persons or 11 percent in 1980.

Which Languages Were Spoken?

- After English, Spanish was the most common language spoken at home in 1990. More than half (54 percent or 17.3 million) of those who spoke a language other than English at home reported they spoke Spanish (see table). This is a sharp increase over 1980, when 11.1 million persons spoke Spanish at home, or 48 percent of those who spoke a non-English language.
- Spanish was nine times more frequent than French (including Creole), which was the second most common non-English language spoken at home and was used by 1.9 million persons. Then followed German, with 1.5 million speakers, and Chinese and Italian, each with 1.3 million. In total, 4.5 million persons spoke an Asian or Pacific Island language.
- The top 15 non-English languages spoken at home in 1990 reflected both new and old immigration patterns to the United States. The recent substantial immigration of Asian and Pacific Islander groups was evident in the dramatic increases between 1980 and 1990 in the number of speakers of Vietnamese, Hindi, Korean, Chinese, and Tagalog.
- In contrast, significant declines were noted over the decade in the number of speakers of some European languages, such as Italian, Polish, and Greek, whose peak wave of immigration was early in this century.

Top 15 Languages Other Than English Spoken at Home: 1990 and 1980

Language	Number (thousands) 1990	Number (thousands) 1980	Percent change, 1980-90
Spanish	17,345	11,116	56
French	1,930	*1,609	20
German	1,548	1,587	−2
Chinese	1,319	631	109
Italian	1,309	1,618	−19
Tagalog (Pilipino)	843	*452	87
Polish	723	821	−12
Korean	626	266	135
Vietnamese	507	195	161
Portuguese	431	352	22
Japanese	428	336	27
Greek	388	401	−3
Arabic	355	217	63
Hindi (Urdu)	331	*130	155
Russian	242	173	40

*3 years and over; all other figures, 5 years and over

Which States Had the Largest Percentage of Persons Who Spoke Another Language?

- New Mexico had the largest percentage of persons who spoke a non-English language at home—36 percent—followed by California, with 31 percent (see map). Only five other States—Texas, Hawaii, New York, Arizona, and New Jersey—had a figure of 20 percent or more.
- In comparison, for the majority of States (34 in all), fewer than 10 percent of the population spoke another language at home. In seven States—all in the South—3 percent or fewer did so.

Other-Language Speakers More Prevalent in the Southwestern States, Hawaii, New York, and New Jersey
Percent Who Spoke a Non-English Language at Home: 1990

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Census Trivia: According to the 1990 census, which large metropolitan area had the highest percentage of persons who spoke a language other than English at home? Which one had the lowest? *(Answer below.)*

Languages Spoken at Home Varied by Region and State

- In all four regions, Spanish was the most frequent language other than English spoken at home in 1990. The next most widely used language, however, was different. In the Northeast, Italian was second; in the Midwest, German; in the South, French; and in the West, Chinese.
- In 39 States and the District of Columbia, Spanish was the most common non-English language spoken at home. The most frequent non-English language for the remaining 11 States varied. French was the most common in Louisiana, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. German was most used in Minnesota, Montana, and North and South Dakota. Portuguese was first in Rhode Island, Yupik in Alaska, and Japanese in Hawaii.

Which States Had the Largest Number of Other-Language Speakers?

Slightly more than half of all non-English language speakers in the United States resided in just three States: California (8.6 million), Texas (4.0 million), or New York (3.9 million). Half of all Spanish speakers lived in California or Texas. More than 4 in 10 speakers of an Asian or Pacific Island language lived in California.

Ability to Speak English

- The pie chart shows that most of the 31.8 million persons who spoke a language other than English at home reported they also spoke English "very well." Only 6 percent said they did not speak English "at all."
- Non-English language speakers varied markedly in their ability to speak English. Not surprisingly, the Nation's more recent immigrants were more likely to have difficulty with English. Among Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese speakers, whose numbers doubled in the last decade, at least 60 percent reported they had some difficulty with English, that is, they reported speaking English less than "very well."
- Among other groups such as French, German, Greek, or Italian speakers, whose heaviest immigration was in earlier decades, one-third or fewer reported some level of difficulty with English.

NOTE: Data for language spoken at home and for ability to speak English are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability.

Issued Feburary 1994

U.S. Department of Commerce
Economics and Statistics Administration
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

Who Uses This Information? Just a few examples:

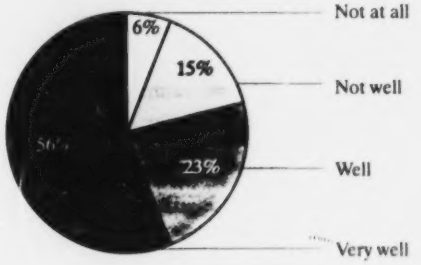
■ Federal Government to identify jurisdictions needing voting materials in different languages to comply with the Voting Rights Act ■ State and local governments and private social service agencies to assist in delivering health, social, or special educational services ■ Television and radio stations to define foreign language service areas and marketing companies to meet demands for products and services tailored to other-language populations

Want to Know More?

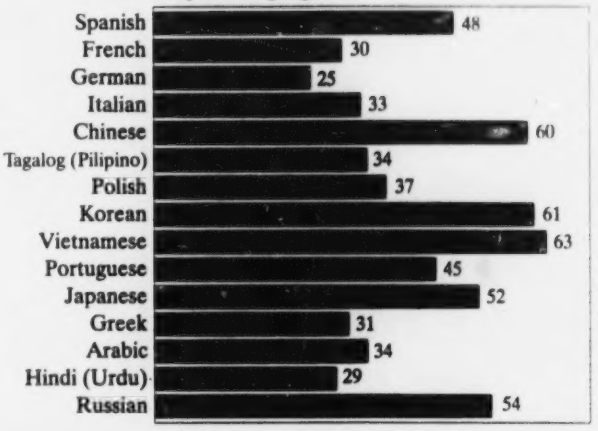
Consult the series of 1990 census reports, CP-2, *Social and Economic Characteristics*, at a large public or university library. Also for sale by Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO).

Call:
■ Customer Services at the Census Bureau, **301-763-4100**, for ordering information about the GPO reports listed above OR for copies of CQC bulletins ■ Rosalind Bruno, **301-763-1154**, for more information about this bulletin or on language spoken at home ■ Karen Mills, **301-763-4263**, for general information on CQC bulletins

Over Half of Other-Language Speakers Spoke English Very Well
Ability to Speak English for Non-English Language Speakers: 1990



Percent Who Spoke English Less Than Very Well: 1990
Top 15 Languages



Trivia Answer: Of the 20 largest metropolitan areas in 1990, Miami had the highest percentage of persons who spoke a language other than English at home (42 percent); St. Louis had the lowest (4 percent).